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## 'Worst Case': Soviet Forces Invade Iran

America's military strategists have a recurring nightmare that comes closer to reality every day. It has to do with Iran, which dominates the Persian Gulf. The latter is the heart that pumps the Middle East's oil to the industrial nations of the West.

Here is the "worst-case scenario" that has the strategists shuddering: The Iranian ruler, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, 84, succumbs to the ravages of age and his death plunges Iran into chaos.

The most disciplined underground group—the communist Tudeh party—sets up a government and calls upon the Soviet Union to help stabilize the country. Within days, Russian tanks surge across the Araxes River into northwestern Iran. From Soviet Turkmenia and Afghanistan in the northeast other Red Army columns race for the Strait of Hormuz, the channels through which the oil tankers must pass.

But the nightmare is just beginning. President Reagan cannot permit the Russians to grab control of the free world's oil. Indeed, Washington has already served notice that

U.S. forces will defend our "vital interests" in the Persian Gulf area. But conventional forces couldn't possibly stop the Soviet onslaught. This could be accomplished only with nuclear weapons.

How real is this strategic nightmare? Would the Kremlin dare to risk World War III even for the prize of Persian Gulf oil? Consider these points, which have been raised in Pentagon strategy sessions:

- The Soviets enacted a similar scenario in Afghanistan. In a secret analysis, the Joint Chiefs of Staff warn: "The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 demonstrated a willingness to apply direct military force to achieve political objectives."

- Intelligence reports claim that Yuri V. Andropov won his ascendancy in the Kremlin with the strong support of the Soviet military. The Red Army marshals now have more influence than they have ever wielded in party councils, which makes military solutions more likely than ever.

- The Russians can invoke a legal technicality to justify an invasion: a 1921 treaty that gives them the right to intervene in Iranian affairs. Though Khomeini abrogated the treaty in 1979, the Soviets never recognized his unilateral announcement.

- The Soviets could cite historical precedent. During World War II, the Soviet Union and Great Britain "in-

vaded" Iran and divided it into northern and southern spheres of influence. The United States not only endorsed the action but also later sent troops into Iran. The military occupation lasted until 1946. The Soviets' reluctant withdrawal marked one of the few times the Kremlin has pulled its forces out of occupied territory.

But the most sobering argument is the presence of 26 Soviet divisions near the Iranian border. They are not border guards and customs officers. They include elite units and sophisticated weapons capable of a full-scale military assault. They are ready to roll.

How would a Soviet invasion of Iran begin? Some 250,000 ground troops, moving behind an awesome battle line of tanks, would lunge across the border. "But any serious aggression could well be spearheaded by first-category airborne divisions," one secret report suggests.

That would require Soviet control of the air. According to U.S. intelligence estimates, the Russians have about 550 fixed-wing aircraft and 500 helicopters in the border region.

More significantly, according to another report, "the Soviets have established command and control capability necessary to conduct large-scale military operations [in Iran]." And their 29 ships in the Indian Ocean would pose a serious threat to our sea lines.